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Historical Society

OF

Southern California

LOS ANGELES, 1899.

ABEL STEARNS

BY H. D. BARROWS.

One of the very earliest American settlers of California, and for many years one of the most prominent and influential citizens of Los Angeles, was Abel Stearns.

Mr. Stearns, or "Don Abel," as he was called both by the native Californians and by the Americans—(in Spanish-speaking countries people, high or low, rich or poor, are called by their Christian names, with the prefix Don or Dona)—was a native of Salem, Mass., where he was born in the year 1799, just one hundred years ago.

He came to Mexico in 1826, where in 1828 he was naturalized; and to Monterey, California, in 1829. In 1833 he settled in Los Angeles, which remained his home till his death, which occurred at San Francisco in 1871, at the age of 72 years.

His residence was on the site of the present Baker Block; and it was for many years, both before and after the change of government, a prominent social center for Southern California. It was here that the beautiful daughters of Don Juan Bandini entertained their wide circle of acquaintances from San Diego, Santa Barbara, etc., at grand balls and other charming social functions characteristic of life in Spanish countries. Here Commodore Jones in 1842, and Captain Fremont in 1846 and '47, and other distinguished his-

torical characters at various periods were hospitably entertained.

The house was a one-story adobe, as were all the houses here in the olden time, and covered the entire ground occupied by the present block, with an extensive "patio," or inner court in the center.

At once on his arrival in California, Mr. Stearns took an interest in the material and political welfare of the community in which he became an enterprising member. And because he joined with others, Californians and Americans, including Alvarado, Castro, Captain Cooper, Hartwell, etc., in energetic opposition to the flagrant misgovernment or mal-administration of Mexican Governors sent here; and to the sending hither of felons as soldiers in large numbers; and also because he joined actively in a general movement of the people, wherein they demanded of Governor Victoria that he should call together the Departmental Assembly in order that it might put in force the law of 1824, and the "*Reglamento*" of 1828, providing for the granting of public lands to citizens—he, Stearns, incurred the enmity of Victoria, who attempted to expel him from the country. Whereupon the people became so exasperated with the Governor's arbitrary course, that they arose in their wrath and drove him from office, compelling him to resign, and to leave the country. And, as if by the irony of fate, the same vessel on which Stearns was to have been transported, carried Victoria himself from San Diego to Mazatlan.

If ever a people were justified in resisting oppression by revolution, the people of California of that period had just cause for their action in opposing the making by Mexico a "Botany Bay" of California; and in protesting against the high-handed nullification of a national law by Governor Victoria.

Forcible resistance to tyranny, especially after all peaceful remedies fail, is generally accounted commendable in any people. And certainly no reason can be assigned why Californians should be judged by any different rule. (See Bancroft, vol. 3, pp. 193 et seq., for the admirable manifesto of Pico, Bandini and Carrillo.)

After settling at Los Angeles, Don Abel engaged in trading at the Pueblo and at San Pedro. In 1836 he was Sindico or fiscal agent of the town.

In 1842 Mr. Stearns sent gold (about twenty ounces) from the first placer mines discovered in California (to wit, on the San Francisco rancho in this county) to the Philadelphia mint, by Mr. Alfred Robinson. The particulars of this matter are related in letters

written by Stearns and Robinson, as printed on pages 20-21 of the Centennial History of Los Angeles County published in 1876.

At about this period Mr. Stearns purchased the Alamitos rancho with its live stock for \$6000, as a foundation for his future landed wealth. He subsequently acquired large tracts of land, including the ranchos Los Alamitos, Las Bolas, La Laguna de Los Angeles, and a half interest in Los Coyotes.

The first real estate acquired by him soon after his arrival, was the tract in this city on which the Arcadia and Baker blocks now stand.

In 1845 he was active with many others against Governor Micheltorana and his "cholos," whom as convict soldiers the Governor had brought with him from Mexico. The full details of this movement furnish ample justification for the action taken by the people in the premises.

In 1846 Mr. Stearns was Sub-Prefect and was appointed agent of the United States government by Consul Thos. O. Larkin, with whose plans he earnestly co-operated.

In 1849 he was one of the members of the first Constitutional Convention, representing the Los Angeles district, and later he served as Assemblyman, Supervisor, City Councilman, etc.

Don Abel Stearns eventually became one of the largest land and cattle owners in California, and although he lost stock heavily by the great two years drouth of 1863-4, and by other reverses, he left at his death an immense estate to his widow, now Mrs. Arcadia de Baker.

Before the greath drouth of the 60's he branded some 20,000 calves annually, which indicated that he owned as high as 60,000 head of cattle.

At one time the extensive Arcadia Block, built in '58, which, it was reported, cost some \$80,000, was mortgaged for something like \$30,000, for which it was sold under foreclosure late in the 60's. But better times came in about '68, and he redeemed the block, having sold, as was reported, five ranches for \$250,000, he still retaining one-fifth interest in the said ranches.

Mrs. Stearns (Dona Arcadia, now Mrs. Baker,) was the daughter of Don Juan Bandini and his wife Dona Dolores de Bandini, daughter of Captain Jose M. Estudillo of San Diego. Mr. and Mrs Stearns had no children.